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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001524

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SUBJECT: KING'S CONFIDANT DISCUSSES LATEST DOMESTIC  
POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

REF: MANAMA 1506

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason 1.4 (b)(d)

11. (C) Summary. Close confidant of the King Hassan Fakhro, in an October 17 conversation with the Ambassador, said that the government fully welcomes the participation of the four boycotting societies in the 2006 parliamentary elections. The government expected, he added, that their participation will change the composition of the elected chamber considerably, undoubtedly complicating the life of Ministers who will spend increasing amounts of time in parliament responding to inquiries. He dismissed as totally untrue rumors that the King was considering a postponement of parliamentary elections. He said that the boycotting societies seem to have accepted that there will be no changes in the constitution before the election, but he fully expected the new parliament to raise the issue of constitutional amendments. He defended the appointed upper house (Shura Council) as a necessary equivalent of a ruling party, designed to prevent political instability. He also predicted that the composition of the Shura will change in time, with appointments becoming "perhaps less unilateral." Fakhro said that he had held discussions with NDI's Fawzi Guleid about an upcoming "dialogue meeting" NDI is organizing. End summary.

12. (C) Minister of Industry and Commerce Hassan Fakhro, a close confidant of the King, reviewed for the Ambassador during an October 17 discussion the latest royal family thinking on recent political developments, including the decision this month by boycotting opposition society Al-Wifaq to register under the new political societies law (reftel). Hassan said he wanted to make two points, which he said can be viewed as official positions:

-- first, there is no question of postponing the October 2006 parliamentary elections, despite rumors that the King was considering doing so. Fakhro confided that he was the anonymous high-level official recently quoted on the front page of Al-Ayam as stating rumors of a possible postponement were not true. (Comment: This rumor first surfaced in September, when it was suggested that the King would announce during the opening of Parliament in early October that he would extend the current parliamentary session by an additional two years. He made no such announcement, but the rumor has resurfaced from time to time. End comment.)

-- second, the government fully welcomes the participation of the four boycotting societies in the 2006 parliamentary elections, and is not having any second thoughts about their participation. He said that the government realized that "it will be no picnic" having the boycotting societies in the parliament, as the make-up of the elected Chamber of Deputies may be totally different. After the elections, Ministers can expect to spend increasing amounts of time in parliament answering questions and inquiries (with Al-Wifaq and other boycotters inside the Council of Representatives), but this is a reality of life in a developing democracy.

13. (C) Fakhro said that he had been in discussion with NDI representative Fawzi Guleid about the latter's plan to organize a "dialogue meeting" that would include members of parliament, government officials, and political societies. He said that he had told Guleid that the government had no problem with this event, provided that the topics for discussion stayed within an agreed-upon scope and did not venture into areas more properly handled by the government or the parliament itself, most notably amendments to the constitution. When the Ambassador pushed back, stating that the constitution would seem to be a reasonable subject for discussion, Fakhro responded with a plea to give the government some time. The constitution didn't come out of the blue, he said. It was the result of deadlock and compromise. Since there is no ruling party in Bahrain, the King devised a formula whereby the elected parliament could not vote down the government regularly, and the government wouldn't feel the need to dissolve the parliament.

14. (C) The King, Fakhro stated, had been working on this concept for three decades, since the last parliament was dissolved while he was Crown Prince. By establishing an appointed Shura Council as an upper house, the government

resolved the problem of no ruling party to protect the government's interests. The Shah of Iran had gone a different route, he noted, by trying to form a ruling party, "and we all know what happened there." Bahrain needs more time to let its parliamentary institutions develop, he repeated.

15. (C) On the issue of amending the Constitution, Fakhro said that opposition boycotters now seem to have accepted that there will be no changes to the constitution before the 2006 elections. After the election, however, he expected the issue to be addressed by the new Parliament, which will feature a much stronger opposition. When the Ambassador commented that any constitutional initiatives could easily be blocked by the appointed Shura, Fakhro replied that he expected in time for there to be some evolution in the composition of the Shura, with the selection of Shura members becoming "perhaps less unilateral."

16. (C) Asked what issues might be discussed at the proposed NDI dialogue meeting, Fakhro focused primarily on parliament and its evolving role. He cited the budget as a notable parliamentary achievement where the parliamentarians have played an increasingly important role. And he noted the accelerated use by parliament of "desired resolutions" ("iqtirah raghbah," which are somewhat akin to "sense of the Congress" resolutions). Fakhro said that this mechanism is increasingly and successfully being used by elected parliamentarians to, for example, get government approval for funding of projects. He said that at the previous day's Cabinet meeting, a dozen such proposals were considered, and most were approved.

MONROE